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ABSTRACT

The Syracuse Stay In School Partnership Project, an alternative to the deficit-remedial dropout intervention model, is described in this report. The collaborative project undertaken by district middle schools and Syracuse University (New York) is based on an inclusive approach to dropout prevention, seeking to modify the school experience for students considered to be at risk. Staff from six middle schools in Syracuse (New York) enrolling a diverse population of 3,200 students participated throughout the 1988-1991 school years in a series of professional development activities to increase teacher knowledge and use of instructional adaptations for an academically diverse and culturally heterogeneous student population. Three project components to address student needs include academic engagement, peer support, and individualized support opportunities. Students perceived to be at risk participated in two projects designed to lessen feelings of alienation from the school: cooperative learning and peer support networks. The suggestion is made that instructional practices reflect the message of inclusion. A worksheet for project student groupings in provided in the appendix. (11 references) (LMI)

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Inclusive Middle Schooling Practices: Shifting from Deficit to Support Models

by

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April 1991

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Historically, efforts to prevent school drop out have been theoretically grounded in a deficit model of cause and a remedial model of intervention. The deficit-remedial model assumes that the student at risk for leaving school prior to graduation presents a complex of motivational and/or academic deficits. These deficits may include the influence of a dysfunctional family, the absence of family support for the value of schooling, and even an openly negative parental attitude toward school (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Hence, intervention has focused upon the remediation of such deficits. To resolve individual student needs, remedial and generally "pull-out" approaches have predominated in school efforts; these have ranged from individualized tutoring made available within the regular school setting but on a pull-out basis to attendance in an alternative academic track or even a separate alternative school designed specifically for students regarded as being at-risk. Slavin and Madden (1989) and Slavin (1987) have critiqued these approaches to intervention and the overall design of academic instruction. At the very least, the evidence is equivocal in providing empirical support for the continued promotion of such approaches as the solution to either promoting overall academic achievement or preventing school drop out.

Similarly, to compensate for the lack of support implied by a dysfunctional family or a family openly hostile to school and schooling, mentoring approaches such as I Have a Dream have enjoyed widespread intuitive appeal for their promise of an

alternative adult model and influence on the student at-risk:

> In a trash littered apartment in a graffiti-covered housing project on the Lower East Side of New York, 14-year-old Eddie is hanging out with his younger sister. It's Saturday and their alcohol- and drug-abusing parents have left them alone. Eddie has spent most of the past week in the apartment, having been suspended for kicking a hole in a wall at school.
>
> Comes a knock on the door. "Hi, Mr. Mark," Eddie says to the chairman of Colgate-Palmolive Co. Reuben Mark walks in and gives Eddie a bear hug. "What's going on with you in school?" he asks, settling onto the worn sofa. "It's crazy for you to be getting F's and getting into trouble. You could be getting A's. You could go to Harvard. Instead, you know what's going to happen. You'll hit 16, you'll drop out and that's it." (Hurley, 1988, p. 41).

In his overview of the mentoring program supported by the I Have a Dream Foundation published in the widely read Psychology Today, Hurley (1988) thus creates a picture of the child in trouble whose ability to go to college and alter forever the path of his or her life is dramatically affected by the presence of mentors such as Mr. Mark.

Interestingly, at the same time that these approaches seem to represent an effort to meet individual child needs, they offer singular solutions based upon assumptions regarding the presumed deficits of a diverse group of children and youth. On the one hand, such approaches seem to assume that the major determinants of at-risk status are within the child and the child's culture and family. Yet, interventions to remediate such needs are strictly proscribed according to certain fairly simplistic procedures across all children at-risk regardless of their socio-personal clinical characteristics. Will young people such as

Eddie be able to break out of a cycle of poverty, low self-esteem, and negative peer influences through the sporadic and isolated contact of an individual mentor? There may be a certain naivete to the expectation that such contact--with someone who may or may not be well-trained, well-motivated, seen by the child as someone who shares the personal characteristics regarded as crucial to the modeling process, and/or committed to the child for the long term--will make it possible for Eddie to go to Harvard.

If, as Evans and DiBenedetto (1990) note, there are multiple pathways to school drop-out and, as Evans and Matthews (1991) describe, each of these implies distinct needs requiring different intervention approaches, our approach to preventing school drop out must become multivariate in perspective and far more responsive to empirical data regarding the children themselves.

A second important issue to be addressed involves the extent to which preventing school drop out involves fixing the child as opposed to restructuring schools and schooling. Natriello (1987) suggested that the alarmingly high statistics on school drop out may indeed reflect failures to learn, but must also be acknowledged as evidence of schools that fail to teach. "Everyone agrees that the way young people experience school is the most frequently cited reason for quitting school" (Natriello, 1987, p. 5). Students say they dropped out because they were failing anyway, because they could not get along with the

teachers, and simply because they did not like school. If as Natriello challenges, schools "push out" the potential drop out by their very nature and design, an emphasis upon alternative, pull-out solutions allows the pattern to continue: Schools and the more traditional and college-oriented curricula cannot cope well with diversity, so those judged to be atypical in various ways are counseled out of the mainstream and into the alternative labeled program.

Of course, smaller alternative programs are designed to provide more intensive, remedial instruction and success experiences supervised by closer teacher attention for students with particular needs. Yet, theories of motivation would caution us that success in such "protected" settings in groupings of only other "labeled" students is unlikely to have a lasting impact upon student self-esteem. It would be easy for the child to devalue achievements in such settings, and overall self-concept is not ultimately changed by time-limited and devalued success experiences. Students can do well in such alternative programs without altering in the slightest their basic beliefs that they cannot succeed in and are in fact not wanted by the mainstream school culture. If this is a possibility, the student's basic problem of alienation from society is actually exacerbated rather than reduced by separate programming.

There are other side effects as well. Given that the purpose of the alternative program is an open agenda to remediate student deficits--and the students who attend such programs

typically carry many formal and informal labels (e.g., ranging from diagnoses such as learning disabilities to terms such as "chronic truant", "behavior problem", and even "at-risk")--attendance carries a stigma and may further isolate the student from the school and community mainstream. By creating the expectation that students with special needs of one sort or another are the responsibility of someone else who will teach the student somewhere else, regular school personnel are given justification for believing the student should adapt to them rather than accepting some responsibility to better accommodate diverse student learning styles in the regular classroom. If this occurs, teachers are not likely to be accepting of students they regard as "not ready" and may add further to the alienation felt by students at-risk from their teachers. Finally, alternative programs create a new grouping arrangement with largely uninvestigated consequences. Grouping students together because they share a problem may increase their camaraderie and mutual support, but it may also have the opposite effect. Negative peer modeling may escalate, teachers in such settings may lose site of age-appropriate expectations, and positive peer models and influences upon behavior and academic performance will be drastically reduced.

These issues and the potential for further isolation and alienation may seem relatively insignificant for the older secondary-age teenager who has either already left school or whose performance and participation are so discrepant that they

are already labeled and/or high school graduation is unlikely. However, efforts to prevent later school drop-out for younger students should be sensitive to the possible negative consequences of pull-out approaches. For younger students, socio-personal and academic difficulties may be less entrenched and are thus perhaps more amenable to change. If prevention or early intervention could be delivered within the mainstream, the further risks of stigmatization and isolation associated with a pull-out model could be avoided. Further support for the need for efforts directed at restructuring the mainstream can be found by examining the demographics of at-risk status: Students who are at-risk for leaving school without a high school diploma are disproportionately children of poverty and of color. Grant and Secada (1990) note the growing discontinuity between the demographics of today's teachers (increasingly white, middle-class, older women) and today's school children (increasingly from non-European-American ethnic and cultural groups--and including boys, of course) and stress the importance of addressing this discontinuity in the restructuring of our schools. Today's school must be more capable of accommodating diversity than has been evidenced thus far: As long as educational outcomes continue to reflect a racial and cultural caste system in this country, schools will be suspect as participants in a system that segregates and tracks rather than providing equality of opportunity to those who will be tomorrow's citizens.

An Inclusive Approach to Drop-Out Prevention

In a drop-out prevention effort designed to avoid the risks associated with labeled programs, students would not be "pulled-out", nor would they be identified or stigmatized in any formal way by the school and their teachers. Instead, the focus of the intervention would be to modify the school experience for students judged to be at risk. Such modifications could address a variety of aspects of the life of the school--academic, social, and extracurricular. Consistent with concerns that students remain connected with peers who can provide positive models of behavior and academic performance and with the mainstream school experience, the Syracuse Stay In School Partnership Project is designed as primary prevention that additionally strives to support educational experiences for the diverse student population of today's schools. Project components are designed to address student needs in three domains: (a) Academic engagement: Staff development activities are focused at increasing teacher use of a variety of instructional styles and the relevance of classroom materials to students' interests and personal-cultural characteristics. Thus the project includes a major focus upon Cooperative Learning, Multicultural Adaptations, and, when possible, the use of Computer-Assisted Instruction to address diverse student learning styles and interests; (b) Peer Support: Technical assistance is provided to individual teachers participating in project activities to purposefully design peer support networks around students at-risk in each class. By using

Cooperative Learning instructional groups as the context of group activity over a period of an entire marking period, students at risk are provided a systematic opportunity to develop positive interaction patterns--including friendships--with peers carefully selected as potential supports and friends based upon individually selected personal, social, and cultural dimensions; and (c) Individualized Opportunities for Support: Although this has not yet been a major focus of project activities, a third component is designed to address specific student needs through a building-level effort developed by the team. Two such efforts include a peer tutoring program (where students at risk provide tutoring to students with severe intellectual disabilities at their school) and a diet-nutrition afterschool activity (conducted for two groups of students whose poor attendance and school performance was thought to be greatly influenced by obesity and poor diet) in two different middle schools.

In the remainder of this paper, we shall provide a brief overview of the Syracuse Stay In School Partnership Project and more detail regarding certain aspects of the first two project components.

Basic Design of the Syracuse Stay In School Partnership Project

The Syracuse Stay In School Partnership Project is a collaborative drop-out prevention project of the Syracuse City School District middle schools and Syracuse University. Staff from the City's six middle schools, enrolling a diverse population of 3200 students, participated throughout the 1988-

1991 school years in a series of professional development activities to increase teacher knowledge and use of instructional adaptations for an academically diverse and culturally heterogeneous student population. As a preventative project directed to middle school age students, the focus of project activities is to identify and prevent at-risk status for school drop out. The various student demographic variables considered to predict later school drop out were used to identify those students who appear to be at risk. In the classes of participant teachers, students at-risk participated in at least two project components intended to ameliorate feelings of alienation from the life of the school: (a) Cooperative Learning, and (b) Peer Support Networks.

Cooperative Learning

Friesen and Wieler (1988) examined Cooperative Learning as one of three recent educational movements (along with Multicultural Education and Peace Education) that should be viewed as natural developments of the Progressive Education tradition in North America. They comment:

> Research shows that societies everywhere value respect for others and equality as quality of life indicators. Thus, philosophical considerations, social science research and social values combine to present a social obligation and therefore a pedagogical mandate. In other words, the school as a primary agent of socialization has the respoonsibility to create enlightened, well-adjusted, respectful members of society. Without this understanding of the role of the school in society, multicultural education, cooperative learning and peace studies would not exist (p. 50).

Cooperative Learning was developed as a strategy to assist schools as systems and children as individuals to thrive in the

interracial school environment required by mandatory bussing to achieve racial integration. Structurally, children are organized into small learning groups that are heterogeneous by design--on dimensions of race, gender, ability, handicapping condition, and achievement--and guided through a learning process that requires them to cooperative with one another in order to master academic content. Interestingly, the value of cooperation is becoming increasingly recognized as a crucial aspect of success in the criterion adult world of work. Thus, while individual achievement continues to be critical and competition can be viewed as a motivational strategy to encourage students to achieve to their fullest potential, cooperation is viewed as both a process to enhance achievement and an outcome of value in an of itself with direct relevance to the needs of the real world.

After nearly 20 years of research, cooperative learning promoters claim that the method enhances academic achievement, intergroup relations between students with and without disabilities, positive self-esteem, positive peer support, internal locus of control, positive group/classroom management, altrusim, and perspective-taking skills (Bossert, 1988; Odynak, 1985). Particularly because of its process of positive peer support and inclusion within heterogeneous student groupings, Cooperative Learning seemed a natural educational reform to promote feelings of connectedness among students at-risk of school drop-out. Our goal was to refocus at least some of the instructional activities at the middle school level from an

individualistic and competitive goal structure to a cooperative goal structure, and thus provide direct, in-classroom support for the participation of **all** students in each learning activity.

Teachers were recruited on an individual, voluntary basis to participate in a series of inservice and technical assitance activities to enable them to master Cooperative Learning as an instructional strategy. Yet, after two years of participation by approximately 25 teachers, we discovered that certain basic practices and student behaviors continued to make it unlikely that those students most at-risk would be in a position to benefit from instructional changes in the regular classroom. We discovered that many of our "at-risk" students were so greatly isolated from other students that they had developed successful strategies to avoid classroom participation on even those days when they did attend class. Teachers needed to become more directly involved in structuring the students' participation, and during the 1990-1991 academic year we varied our model accordingly.

Peer Support Models

In Cooperative Learning, there exist various guidelines for formation of the learning groups: These relate primarily to adhering to the heterogeneous nature of the Cooperative Learning Group. Without altering that commitment, we determined to work more directly with the teachers to insure that a Peer Support Network would be accessible to students regarded as being at-risk. Thus, various predictor variables were utilized to

identify those students regarded to be at-risk, and project staff met with individual participating teachers to deliberately structure a cooperative learning group around each at-risk student that would potentially function as a Peer Support Network.

We have appended a form used in individual sessions with project teachers to structure a Peer Support Network around each at-risk student. Using the dual criteria of an absence rate of 20% or more and/or passing fewer than 5 courses at the end of the first marking period, project staff work with each teacher to construct the Cooperative Learning group for each student so identified as "at-risk." Other than our own background and clinical experiences in peer interactions, inclusive schooling for students with disabilities, and special education for students with emotional disturbance, we have been unable to locate an empirically-based literature on the design of positive peer supports for students at-risk. Thus, our criteria for constructing these networks are primarily clinical and experiential. The literature on students at-risk suggests that these individuals have friends who are a negative influence on their own school achievement and motivation (see Evans & Matthews, in press). Our own interviews with the teachers suggests instead that many of the students at-risk are social isolates--and might well be labeled as clinically depressed in some instances. These students have virtually no school behavior--they are often absent, and when they do attend school,

they keep to themselves and fail to participate in any classroom interactions with other students. A smaller sub-sample are characterized by aggressive, acting-out behavior and friendships with peers who are similarly acting-out.

Teachers participated in a general training session on using Cooperative Learning to construct positive peer supports, and an experienced teacher provided a model class example with the necessary individual student information (and a process for collecting that information, which we developed) to construct the groups on a practice basis. These teachers then gathered the necessary background information in their own classes to prepare for the individual consultation sessions to design the Cooperative Learning groups. This process occurred at mid-year, and teachers were quite knowledgable regarding their students' school interests and peer interaction patterns. They knew less about the students' home lives. Without exception, teachers were enthusiastic in their choices for the peer networks. We are in the process of developing criteria for selecting these networks, but several general "rules" were followed to identify groups of 4 students: (a) each group should represent heterogeneity in race and gender (e.g., African-American and white; male and female); (b) with rare exception, only one at-risk student was in any group; (c) at least one and, if possible, two of the 4 group members were selected based upon teacher judgment that he or she might be a potential friend for the student at-risk. These students had to be similar in interests and academic ability

(though their achievement was, in fact, quite different). Thus, we did not select "star" students as potential friends, but students very much like the student at-risk with one important exception: The potential friend was regarded by the teacher as a positive influence; and (d) personalities were considered to avoid potentially explosive or negative group combinations, such as "macho" boys and timid girls.

These groupings of students will stay together for their class Cooperative Learning activities for at least a ten week period. During May 1991, "de-briefing" sessions will be held between the first author and the teachers to discuss their impressions and review student records. Various individual student data (achievement and attendance) are available to support the extent to which students were engaged and academically successful. We shall be particularly interested in the impact of such project activities (where the degree of involvement is an independent variable) upon dimensions of the School Self-Rating (see Meyer, Harootunian, & Williams, 1991) and school friendship patterns.

Summary

The project activities described here are largely exploratory, and formative evaluation activities are ongoing to refine and expand successful components across the middle school experience. Comparison data are available as not all teachers at the middle schools participate in project activities: By identifying students (both at-risk and not-at-risk) enrolled in

only courses taught by non-participating teachers, we shall be able to make comparisons on several outcomes variables monitored by the project (see Meyer et al., 1991). Ultimately, we shall be able to follow our students through to their target high school graduation dates. This long-term commitment is essential for the proper validatation of prevention and intervention efforts. We would also maintain, however, that there are so many intervening variables affecting the lives of these young people that projects such as ours may not have a meaningful impact upon even most students even for strategies established as being effective in the short run. This possibility makes it critical that careful data be maintained regarding individual student characteristics to move efforts in this area beyond simplistic and singular approaches applied to groups of children. Finally, admitting that negative influences continue to impinge upon our children throughout the school years should also be a primary reason to critically examine the very structure of schooling. What message do our schools give to students? A values base for district efforts will help to ensure that the message of inclusion--everyone does indeed belong and it is our responsibility to insure that everyone learns--is reflected in the practices of instruction.

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STAY IN SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP PROJECT
SPRING 1991 GROUPINGS

— CONFIDENTIAL —

Teacher's Name _____ Phone _____

Subject Area _____ School _____ Team _____

	STUDENT'S NAME	AGE & GRADE	CONTACT PERIOD	GROUP MEMBERS		OTHER SISP TEACHER CONTACT(S)
1				1	3	
				2	4	
2				1	3	
				2	4	
3				1	3	
				2	4	
4				1	3	
				2	4	
5				1	3	
				2	4	
6				1	3	
				2	4	
7				1	3	
				2	4	
8				1	3	
				2	4	